

The Cultural Context of the Torch Race in Athens

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The ritual of the lampadephoros existed in Athenian society from the eighth century B.C. through the second century A.D. Using historical and anthropological analysis, the torch race was examined at different levels - as a ritual, as part of a festival, as a contest, and as a

type of exchange behavior. The majority of the evidence used in this research were primary literature, inscriptions, and vase paintings. All secondary accounts of the torch race, such as those by J.R.S. Sterrett and M. Nilson were also consulted.

The study revealed how a ritual based on the association of fire with sacredness arose in Athenian society to be used as a means to propitiate Prometheus, Hephaestus, and Athena, all fire, light, or craft deities, during an assembly for celebration. Evidence showed that the ritual was modified into a sport form by the Athenians in the sixth century. Ancient evidence also suggested that unlike other Athenian athletic competitions, throughout its existence there was a consciousness of the religious significance of the lampadephoría by participants and observers. The paper also traced the different forms the torch race acquired - individual, team, and relay, examining how these forms were related to the changes in Greek social organization.

Just as sport usually depicts the culture of which it is a part by dramatizing changes in social reality, the capacity of the ritual of the lampadephoría to mold, shape, or change the society was explored in the research. In this way, the torch race was significant as an expression of hegemony: as Farnell has suggested, the torch race showed the ancient family religion predominant over state religion in the sixth century. In the same light, the lampadephoría was studied to reveal the Athenian Empire's hold over her subjects at the end of the fifth century. At this time, the lampadephoría appeared not only in Athenian evidence, but in evidence from many other subject city states. As Athens built her empire, the locale of the torch race widened. In a similar transmission of culture, the torch race also was used in Athens to mark the introduction of foreign cults into polis religion in the fourth and third centuries when new festivals incorporated the ritual into their agendas.

As a ritual rooted in the practical, active experience that made up the Greek culture, the torch race was an integral part of the society. By studying the lampadephoría in its cultural context, many spheres of life in ancient Athenian society were displayed.